Cover art

Sleep in enchanted colors

Frederic Leighton, Flaming June, 1895. Photo credit for the journal cover image and the image above: Art Resource, NY.

Flaming June is a painting that is undoubtedly captivating. The piece has been reproduced countless times. It is well-known for its beautiful subject matter and its vibrant dazzling colors that invoke pure sunshine. With a closer look, one can see the strange mysteries of paint that lie right on its dazzling surface.

The subject is deeply asleep, but is it dawn or dusk? The shimmering water and color of the sky in the background only tell us that the sun is near the horizon. The neatness of her long flowing hair suggests that she has just fallen asleep. The subject seems exposed and vulnerable. One can see right through her bedclothes. Is the picture merely beautiful or subtly erotic?

The work is by Lord Frederic Leighton (1830–1896), a controversial but popular artist in his time in late 19th century England. Leighton was born into wealth and spent his young adulthood studying in Florence, Italy, and later in Paris, France. He embraced a classical style, which is, at times, almost photographic, and strove for balanced but vibrant colors. As he grew older, his skill at color increased, as did his propensity for classical figures and masterful drapery in his pictures.1 Coinciding with his crescendo in skill, his popularity spread through the social circles of England. With his connections, likeability, and growing fame as a subtle visionary, it was almost easy for Leighton to secure his spot as the President of the Royal Society in London, as well as earning a Knighthood, in 1878. A day after he was made Baron in 1896, he died.

Leighton and some of his contemporaries had simplified their subject matter and were focused on the purest forms of beauty. The phrase that described this movement best was “l’art pour l’art” or “art for art’s sake.” The idea was that pieces of art were specific to the artist and separate from greater moral, religious, or political messages.2 Whereas modern art is much more open to work that may be perceived on many levels of beauty or nonbeauty,2 this group of artists was focused only on the beautiful, so much so that many at the time complained of their works’ “cloying sweetness.”2 Although many of his works seem like they are simply pretty portraits, Leighton was a quiet innovator in his own right. “Art for art’s sake” was for pure pleasure, actually a daring thing in his era, a time of a strictly moralistic Britain. “His aim,” wrote Mark Stocker in a letter to the editor of Victorian Periodicals Review, “was not so much to contribute to middle class morality but to please the eye by achieving a formal balance and harmony of tones.”3

It was not only the “sweetness” of this painting that attributed to its perception as being flat—the composition itself seems almost one-dimensional. Distinct from Leighton’s other works, the squared lower portion with the flat horizon and thigh cutting across the frame invokes a very horizontal and layered feeling. The way that the woman’s body is positioned has been hotly contended—a review of its showing at the British Medical Society in 1895 said that “the physiological and anatomical possibility of the ... picture will be questioned by everybody,” and that only an “acrobat” could possibly be so comfortable sleeping in such a position.5 His use of anatomy was questioned many other times. Selwyn Britton called Leighton’s painting Psyche in Her Bath “all wrong in proportions, by at least a head.”6 Indeed, the distorted anatomy bears a resemblance to the distorted anatomy depicted in Leda and the Swan by Michelangelo, painted in 1529.

Although this work may appear flat, there are more dimensions than meet the eye to the painting and the artist behind it. The flow of the sea behind the woman into the waves of her dress, with her waterfall-like hair and strange contortions of her body, makes the painting an exposition of the line between realism and abstraction. The composition is almost a contradiction—whereas much of the outer portions lay out a very square and flat space, her legs are angled in a way that creates a spiral. This combination is complex, almost like a visual riddle.7 The beauty of the orange gradient transforms her body into the very color itself. The very subject of the piece is no longer the woman—she is a rainbow in orange. The waves of the dress are exaggerated by the straightness of the sea and the granite behind her. These waves and the masterfully-balanced (but bright) tones of the paint distract from the actual discomfort of her position and the “impossible” length of her thigh.6

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2017.05.004
2352-7218/© 2017 National Sleep Foundation. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
There is a very subtle distortion to the anatomy and the flatness of the picture in tandem with its obvious distance from the foreground to the background. It separates this picture from many others from the time onto another plane of magical proportions that have captivated many modern viewers while leaving those of the past to disdain it (some even calling it looking "suspiciously like bad poster art"\(^8\)).

As one of Leighton’s last works, *Flaming June* has a different, deeper quality than his earlier paintings. Whether he meant it or not, the display of sleep in the Victorian era was symbolic of coming death.\(^6\) Leighton was ill at the time he made the painting, so much so that he could not even appear at its showing. Although much of his work was purely for its aesthetic, there may be a deeper meaning in the peace of the sleeping woman. His work combines Victorian symbolism and the purity of his own movement.

Disclosures

Authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

References


Meir H. Kryger MD
*Art Editor*
Corresponding author
*E-mail address:* meir.kryger@yale.edu

Isabella Siegel
*Guest Art Editor*